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ABSTRACT

Adult students are voluntary learners. They have certain expectations of achievement when returning to the classroom. The teacher of adults should utilize these students' experiences, because adults can respond better if encouraged to draw on their personal knowledge. The non-English speaking adult students learning English as a second language have several obstacles to overcome. Not only must they learn to communicate in a new language, but also they must adapt themselves to American culture. Influences on an adult's ability to learn English as a Second Language (ESL) skills include aptitude, age, motivation, and native language interference. These influences are variable and can positively and/or negatively affect ESL learning. Reading ESL is important in order for the non-English adult to communicate effectively and to become more aware of himself in relation to his society. Several factors affect the adult's ability to learn to read English. They are oral knowledge of English, literacy level in the native language, the native language orthography, and student incentive. (Author/WR)

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READING

ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

AND THE ADULT LEARNER

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THE ADULT STUDENT

The adult returning to school has expectations which differ from those of average school age students. Because he is older and posseses a greater range of life experiences, the adult desires to utilize his accumulated knowledge to achieve goals that are practical, interesting, and suitable to his background. Returning to the classroom voluntarily, he relinquishes valuable free time and brings with him high expectations of achievement as well as discipline, social responsibility, and independence.

The adult should be encouraged to respond actively in a classroom atmosphere that provides interaction with peers and with the instructor. As a result of his experiences, the adult can be a more active learner in the classroom, since he is able to combine his practical knowledge with the subject matter he is learning. The adult achieves a higher level when one takes advantage of the student's experiences, creating a classroom environment where reciprocal learning takes place.

THE ADULT STUDENT LEARNING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

Adults who are learning English as a second language (ESL) are faced with an additional problem of communication in a society whose culture has a different set of social and linguistic patterns. Since knowledge of English is usually necessary for survival in the adult's environment, there is a greater necessity for learning the basic communication skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. In addition to basic survival, ESL communication skills enable adults to gain job advancement, obtain citizenship, and to feel more psychologically integrated into American society. Assimilation is quicker once the adult learns English and can communicate effectively in his adopted language.

There are certain considerations which appear to influence an adult's ability to learn English: aptitude, age, motivation, and native language interference.

Aptitude. It is not precisely known what determines aptitude to learn a second language. The ability to solve mathematical problems or possessing a musical "ear" have been proposed as possible connections to a person's inherent ability to learn a second language. It appears that an adult's ability to learn a second language in the classroom is related to the amount of formal training he received in his native language. The higher the level of formal education an adult has achieved as a student in his own language, the greater is his ability to conceptualize in a second language such as English. Items such as knowledge of tense markers, word forms, parts of speech, of one's native language contribute towards the adult's aptitude for learning ESL.

Age. Adults generally have a greater long-term memorizing facility

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than children, which give them a greater advantage for second language learning. This long-term memorizing ability aids in the repetition and response of sounds, symbols, and words. It also provides an organization of newly acquired language structures, enabling the student to have greater recall and understanding.

However, age can also be detrimental. Psychological and physiological factors affect the age of second language acquisition. Speech is controlled by the left hemisphere of the brain, which controls all motor activity. After the age of puberty, it is more difficult to acquire new motor skills such as articulation, because the left hemisphere of the brain somehow loses its resilience. This has a definite effect on language learning.

Inhibition may also hinder second language learning. Unlike children, adults are more self-conscious and, therefore, hesitate for fear of making mistakes while learning ESL.

Motivation. Motivation can influence second language learning. Non-English speaking adults may be motivated by financial as well as psychological needs to communicate effectively in English. They learn English for job advancement; without a better knowledge of English, it is more difficult to obtain higher paying and more satisfying jobs.

The type of ESL communication skills taught in class may also have an effect on an adult's motivation. If listening and speaking are considered more important to be learned by the student, then he may lack the desire to read and/or write. Conversely, if the student wants to learn only reading and/or writing, he may resent learning how to speak, thus decreasing his motivation to learn oral English.

Anomie, the feeling of estrangement in a foreign culture, may play a negative role in motivation. As one attempts to become acculturated into a new society, conscious or unconscious feelings of alienation may inhibit adaptation. This would include lessening the motivation for learning the language of the new culture. The ease in adapting to American culture with its different values, then, can be considered a motivating factor to learn ESL.

Native language interference. When learning another language, an adult will encounter certain pronunciation and structural difficulties because of his native language. This will have an effect on his ability to acquire English, since he may attempt to transfer or translate structure and vocabulary from his native language and consequently make errors in English. Native language interference can be anticipated in language learning, but not all the errors made can be attributed to this. Errors may also result from the inherent linguistic complexities of English.

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THE ESL ADULT AND READING

Reading is an important skill for the non-English speaking adult. The ability to read effectively is essential for survival in order to comprehend basic signs, purchase items necessary to daily living and to function in a new society. Reading English is also important for the adult student to be knowledgeable about American society and his role in it, thus making him a more effective and concerned citizen.

There are several factors affecting an adult's ability to learn to read English as a second language. They are: oral knowledge of English; literary level in the native language; the orthography of the native language; and the student's incentive.

Oral knowledge of English. The ability to read ESL presupposes a knowledge of linguistic structures and vocabulary. Without a knowledge of the sound patterns of English, it is difficult to decode; without a knowledge of the structural elements and vocabulary, it is impossible to comprehend. The most important element in teaching reading to ESL students is a knowledge of the spoken language. For the adult non-English speaking student, an oral knowledge of English phonology, grammar and vocabulary is the most efficient basis for the teaching of reading. Relevant and effective reading instruction requires that the teacher utilize the student's knowledge of the aural/oral skills.

Literacy level in the native language. An adult who is illiterate (unable to read or write) in his native language will have a more difficult task of reading English. It will be necessary to introduce him to the concept of print prior to any reading instruction.

A functionally illiterate adult, possessing no more than basic word recognition skills and limited comprehension ability in his native language, will have a greater advantage than an illiterate who is reading English. Although generally unable to depend on print as the means of carrying out his everyday communication needs, he has at least been introduced to the concept of reading.

The literate adult, able to read in his native language, should find it easier to read once he has begun to learn English linguistic structure and vocabulary through the aural/oral skills. A literate adult has the ability to decode and encode at a more sophisticated level, enabling him to transfer these skills more quickly to reading English.

ESL classes concentrating primarily on the speaking and listening skills will consist of students who are at different reading level in English.

Figures 1,2, and 3 illustrate the possible reading levels in an adult ESL classroom in relation to oral English skills and native language English competence in reading.

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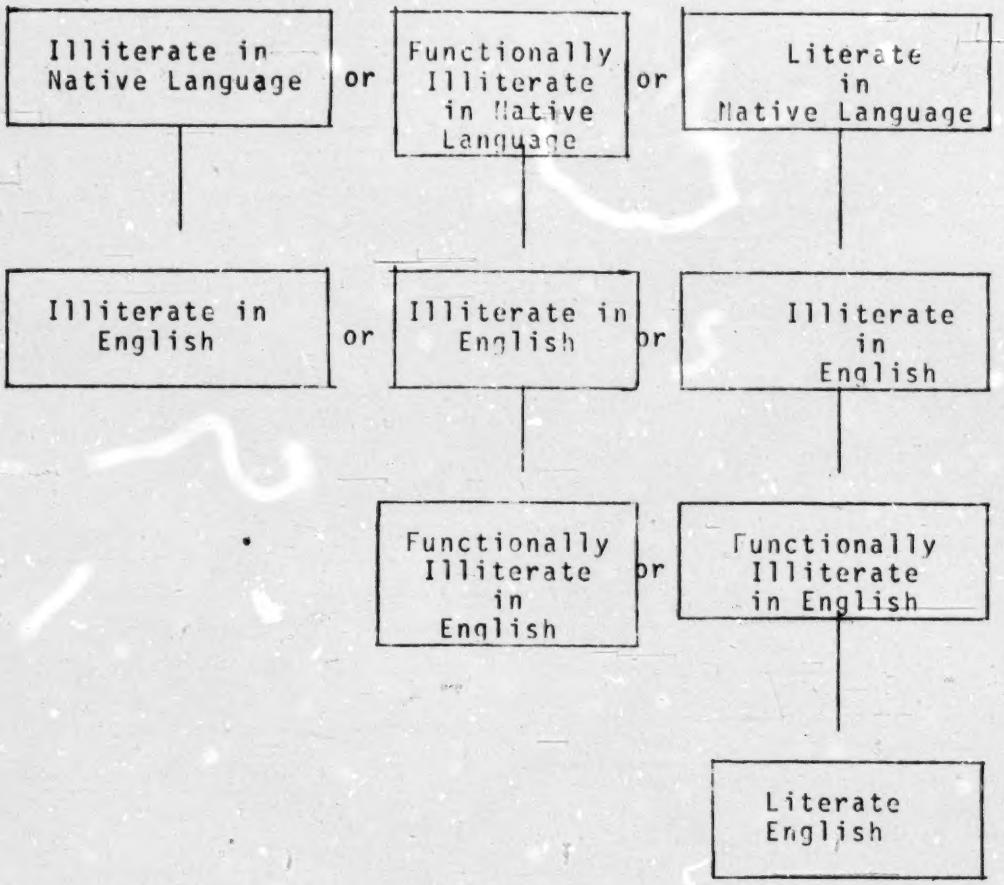
FIGURE I

ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE: ELEMENTARY LEVEL
(LISTENING AND SPEAKING SKILLS)



There are three general reading levels for the adult in his native language, as well as reading in English. Note that the more literate one is in the native language, the greater the possibilities of being illiterate functionally illiterate, or literate in English. If a student is literate in English but has only elementary skills in speaking and listening, it probably indicates that the student previously studied English reading and writing skills in his native country.

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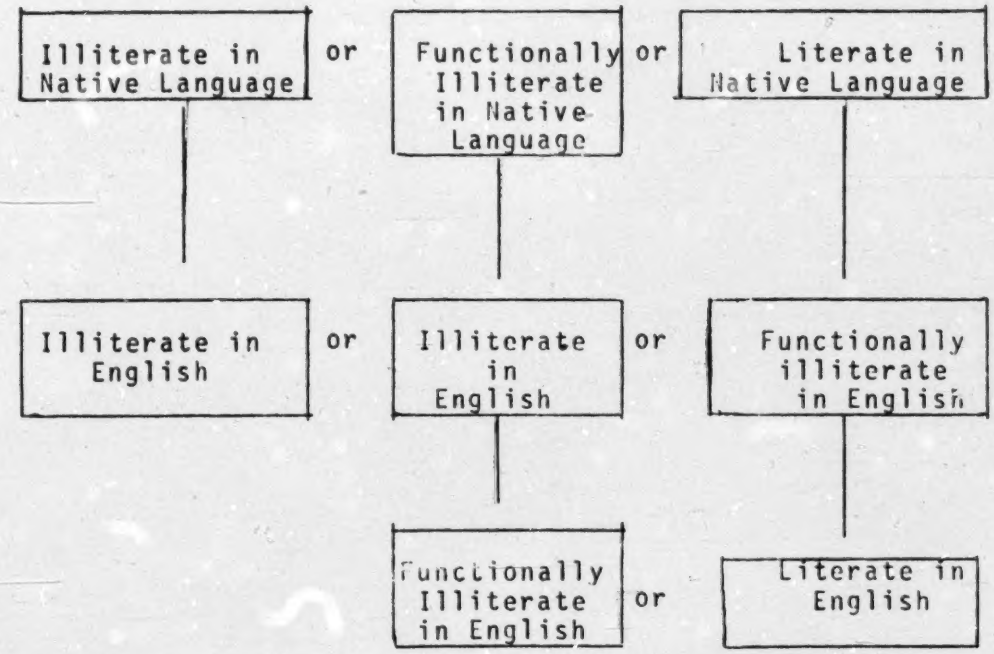
FIGURE II

ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE: INTERMEDIATE LEVEL
(LISTENING AND SPEAKING SKILLS)



Note that an adult considered literate in his native language would not likely be illiterate in English at the intermediate level. He would have enough contact with English print to at least be considered functionally illiterate.

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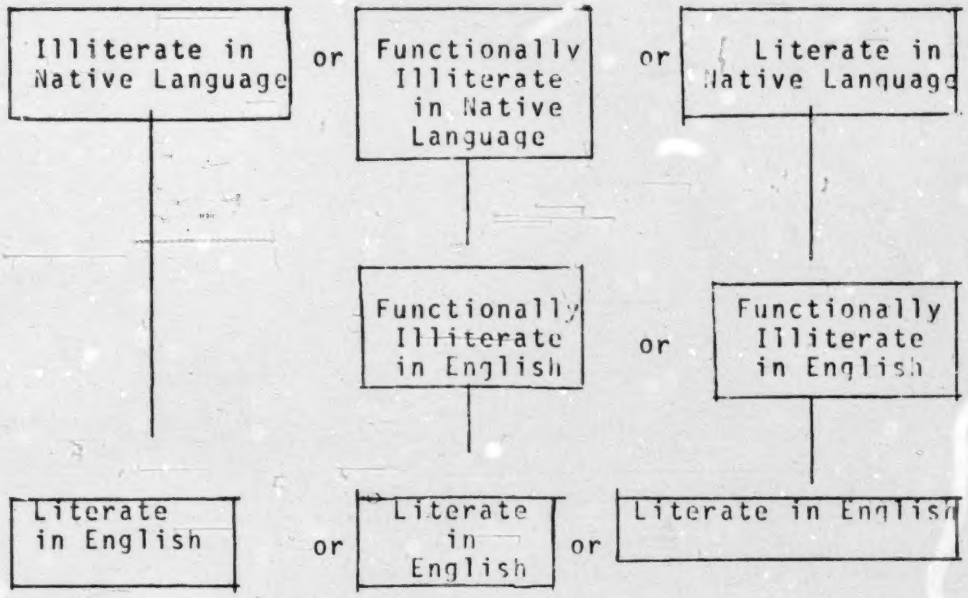
FIGURE III

ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE: ADVANCED LEVEL
(LISTENING AND SPEAKING SKILLS)



At an advanced level, ESL students probably will be at least functionally illiterate or literate in their native language in order to comprehend and use advanced level linguistic structures. It is unlikely that an advanced ESL student would be illiterate in his native language, unless he never had the opportunity to learn to read in his native language. A student who is functionally illiterate in his native language would not be illiterate in English at the advanced level because of his contact with the language.

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The orthography of the native language. A third element influencing the ability to read ESL is the similarity or difference of the native language orthography to the Roman alphabet. A learner whose script is completely unlike the Roman script might have difficulty learning English symbols. Adjusting to left to right eye movement is a consideration if the student's native script is right to left (e.g. Arabic) or top to bottom (e.g. Chinese). The native orthography may also contain ideographic (symbols with representing ideas), which differ from English grapheme. If the script is similar to English (i.e. the orthography of the romantic languages), then the problem might be one of transfering phonemes, whose combinations differ from the native language to English.

Student Incentive. Does the adult ESL student consider reading an important skill to be learned? An adult's desire to read English may be inversely proportional to the availability of reading material in his native language. Areas with a large ethnic population often have several newspapers and periodicals printed in the native language. Consequently, the ESL adult from that area may not feel the necessity for reading English. Resentment towards the "relearning" or reading in a second language may have an effect on his desire to learn. The teacher's responsibility is to convince the student of the importance of reading by demonstrating the practicalities of filling applications, following written directions, reading newspapers, magazines, and by creating an interest in literature.

SUMMARY

An adult student is a voluntary learner. He has certain expectations of achievement when returning to the classroom. The teacher of adults should utilize his students' experiences, because adults can respond better if encouraged to draw upon their personal knowledge.

The non-English speaking adult student learning English as a second language has several obstacles to overcome. Not only must he learn to communicate in a new language, but he must adapt himself to American culture. Influences on an adult's ability to learn ESL skills include aptitude, age, motivation and native language interference. They are variables which can positively and/or negatively affect ESL learning.

Reading ESL is important in order for the non-English adult to communicate effectively and become more aware of himself in relation to his society. Several factors affect his ability to learn to read English. They are oral knowledge of English, literacy level in the native language, the native language orthography, and student incentive.

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